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III

RITUAL

I. PRELIMINARIES

*796 On the grounds of time and occasion the Nupe rituals fall into two sharply distinct groups. On one side we have rituals occupying a regular, fixed place in the calendar of the country; on the other, rituals which, as the Nupe say, 'have no month', that is, whose performance is contingent upon the variable needs of the moment. A few 'fixed' rituals which can also be performed out of season and others which, originally 'fixed', have become 'movable' represent intermediate or transitional forms. But even here the twofold division is not obscured. For in the case of rituals performed both regularly and contingently, the latter performance is clearly marked off as an adaptation to particular circumstances; it is on a much smaller scale and lacks the festive features which accompany the regular ceremony, being as it were only concerned with the business in hand.

*796 Surveying Nupe country as a whole the number of different rituals is strikingly large and their geographical distribution irregular; the chart on p. 69 lists a number of them by name and locality, and also shows their varying times of performance. Only one ritual, *gunnu*, occurs everywhere; others are common to one or two tribal sections only or even to a few villages, where special local conditions appear to justify the special cult. In the extreme case a particular ritual may be restricted to a single village community. We met already with instances, such as the Mokwa ritual of the sacred crocodile, the rituals called *ketsá* and 'Father Niger' in the riverain area, and the worship, once more on the river, of the sacred bronze figures associated with Tsoede. Let me add some further examples: in the kolanut-growing district of Labozhi we find the special cult of an ancestress reputed to have introduced the planting of kolanut; a somewhat similar cult, concerned with the cultivation of the oilpalm, occurs in the village Kutiwengi, in the 'oilpalm belt' to the north; Jebba Island possesses a special ritual, unique in Nupe country, which is meant to ward off smallpox; while Mokwa and a few villages in the neighbourhood practise the similarly unique masked dance *elo*.

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CHART OF NUPE RITUALS

	Month	LOCALITIES—INLAND								LOCALITIES—RIVER			
		Doko	*Sakpe*	*Kutigi*	*Etsu*	*Labozhi*	*Ewugi*	*Wuna*	*Mokwa*	*Jebba*	*Leaba*	*Gbajibo*	*Bele*
'Fixed' Rituals	1(13)	[navũ]	gunnu [navũ]	[navũ]					[navũ]				
	2												
	3			gani	lugba*								
	4												
	5	žiba					gbara		gunnu				
	6	sakó											
	7					gunnu	sara				gunnu	elo	
	8							dakunu			mamma		
	9	žiba					gunnu*	gunnu*	elo	mamma; dzakó;		gunnu	gunnu
	10			[sallagi]		nnakógba			sara; bukpe	ndá-duma	ndáduma	mamma	žiba; ndáduma
	11	gunnu	mamma		gunnu			fuſobo		gunnu			
	12			[sallakó]									
'Movable' Rituals		Dibo Saba; fitakũ	sara; žikinta	gunnu; žikinta	tídzana	gunnu	dzanavu; žikinta	žicigbã	sara; bukpe	tídzana; žikinta; ketsá; ndáduma	žikinta	sara; žikinta; ndáduma	žikinta

Note : Names in square brackets indicate Moslem observances (see chap VIII). Rituals marked by a star are performed triennially; as these are isolated cases they are disregarded in the text.

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With so much variety it is impossible to select a particular community whose rituals would be 'typical' of Nupe practice; rather, each village cycle of rituals is typical (or atypical) in its own way. Yet neither is it possible to describe every variety of Nupe ritual (several of which I only knew from hearsay or from informants' reports). What seems more important is to examine some such cycle of rituals within the setting in which it operates, that is, within the corporate life of the community for which it is primarily valid or, in Nupe parlance, by which it is 'owned'.[1] As regards the question, which particular cycle of rituals to select, I propose to resolve it by taking two instances, one from Doko and the other from Jebba Island. This compromise seems the most expedient both since I have actually observed the majority of rituals in these two places and since these represent an interesting contrast, Doko being a 'typical' inland village, with hereditary chieftainship, and Jebba Island a riverain community where chiefs are elected. Let me add that, from other points of view, both communities are also 'atypical'; Jebba, because it is one of the two villages possessing major 'relics' of Tsoede; and Doko, because it formerly belonged to a federation of villages (or 'towns' as the Nupe would say), which type of political organization is unique in Nupe country. As regards the two communities themselves, a full description has been given elsewhere and need not be repeated.[2]

One further point of more general import may be anticipated. In spite of the great variety of local cults the number of rituals performed and their place in the year's cycle do not differ greatly in the different communities. Usually there are one or two movable rituals, rarely more, and two or three fixed rituals, only a few villages having four or five; and though the dates of the fixed rituals vary somewhat from place to place, they fall more frequently in certain months (e.g. the 9th and 11th) than in others (e.g. the 3rd or 5th).[3] The corresponding months in our calendar, incidentally, can only be calculated approximately since the Nupe reckon in lunar months, the year beginning with the onset of the rains, and insert a 13th month every five years. In other years the 1st month is usually also called the 13th, especially when the rains are late, which not infrequently leads to confusion, some localities being temporarily a month out in their reckoning.[4]

[1] I am here using the phrase 'primarily valid' since certain rituals imply an additional, wider validity (or 'ownership') which extends to the whole sub-tribe or even tribe. This point will be examined later (see below, p. 103).

[2] See *A Black Byzantium*, pp. 19, 25, 35. [3] See the chart on p. 69.

[4] In 1934, for example, the 1st month was taken to have begun on March 15th in the eastern part of Nupe, but at the end of April I found that the people of Mokwa, in the west, had just started with their 1st month. For a fuller description of the Nupe calendar, see *A Black Byzantium*, Appendix V.

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8. Scene from *gunnu* dance in Jebba

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9. *Dzabó* sacrifice
[p. 70 (A)]

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[p. 70(a)]

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10. The *zumácikà* medicine shrine in Jebba

11. Dressing the *mamma* masks

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This roughly uniform timing of the fixed rituals might suggest that they are bound up with important seasonal events, farming activities and the like, which are similarly uniform throughout the country. The 9th month, which is so regularly accompanied by rituals, in fact represents a crucial phase in the life of a farming people, coinciding with the end of the rains and the time of the sorghum harvest, the staple crop of the country. But the 11th month, which falls in the middle of the dry season, coincides only with a minor agricultural activity, the harvesting of the last bean crop. Conversely, an important agricultural phase, the 1st (or 13th) month, when rains and planting begin, is infrequently accompanied by ceremonials. Other dates marked by rituals in different communities coincide with the first millet harvest (5th month), with the first yam harvest (7th month), or fall in the early rains (3rd month), when nothing in particular happens.

The Nupe rituals are thus neither firmly linked with important agricultural activities nor yet concentrated in the season when farmwork is at a standstill, when the granaries are full, and when the people have both food and time to spare. But there is a nexus of a more general kind; for the Nupe rituals tend to be associated with the reaping of the crops more than with the planting, with 'ends' more than with 'beginnings', bearing upon the renewal of the fertility of which one has just received a token rather than upon attempts to secure it at the outset. The subsequent discussion will bear out this view. Here we must note that the ceremonials which happen to coincide with this or that harvest are in no way strict first-fruit rites, meant to signal the proper time for reaping or to control the first consumption of the new food; nor yet are they special feasts of thanksgiving. Rather is their religious import more unspecific, bearing on fertility, the thriving of crops, and health in general, irrespective of the particular occasion.

2. THE INLAND VILLAGE

(i) *Priestship*

The list of Doko rituals is brief. There are two movable ones —*fitakū* ('The Stone drinks') and *Dibo Saba* (named after an ancestor chief),—and three fixed rituals: *ɨiba*, which is performed twice, in the 5th and 9th month; *sakó*, performed one month after the first *ɨiba*; and *gunnu*, performed in the 11th month.[1]

The ceremonials are in the charge of different officiants. The ritual *Dibo Saba*, addressed to an ancestor chief, is also performed by the chief. The ritual *sakó* concerns only the small group of

[1] In our calendar the 5th month corresponds roughly to July–August, the 9th to December, the 11th to February.

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of the same territory; political autonomy; and numerous norms of behaviour and types of relationship.

With all this the next chapter will deal. Let me here only explain an apparent omission; if this discussion made no mention of that other religion demanding complete conversion, Christianity, the reason is, simply, the unimportance of Christianity in Nupe life. The number of converts is extremely small and the progress of Christianity insignificant. The Nupe generally are not hostile to those who have become Christians; they do not subject them to special disabilities; nor do they despise them; only mallams will sometimes call Christians, contemptuously, *káfiri*, 'unbelievers'. Here, too, the general attitude is one of tolerance, though it is more pronounced among pagans than among Moslems. The former (including nominal Moslems) quite often send their children to mission schools, and most Nupe keep on friendly terms with missionaries or African evangelists. But this tolerance always goes with the conviction that Christian missionizing will remain ineffectual; friendliness with Christians is unobjectionable only because it is of no consequence. Nor do the Nupe ever commit themselves by their association with Christians. They do not intermarry with Christian converts; they do not ask them to their family feasts; and the converts never come from solid, stable families, but from among unattached individuals—old people without relations, young orphans, or the children of strangers. Even among these, I was told, apostasy often occurs in later life. And here it is not the pagan religion which is the greatest rival of Christianity, but the steadily encroaching Islam.